ABCFM Ms 15.1846

Ningpo Nov. 8th 1845

Dear Brethren

As the season advances I am reminded that in a few short months all that remain of those with whom I am personally acquainted will have left the Seminary. I desire to address the society once more before it shall be composed of entire strangers; must be my apology, if apology be necessary, for troubling you so soon after the date of my last letter.

If I could by any means convey to your minds a distinct impression of the scenes which are daily passing before my eyes, I should hope that some of you would wish to spend your lives in a field which promises so rich a return. I shall attempt to give some idea, such as I can in a brief letter, of the field that is before us, and the kind of work we have to do. Could you suddenly find yourself transported to the midst of the city of Ningpo I know not what strange thoughts would arise in your minds or what part of the scene around you would first arrest your attention. Perhaps you would first look around and above you in astonishment at finding yourself in the thoroughfares of a great & populous city hemmed in so closely on all sides by walls of houses. The widest street in the city is not wider than the halls which traverse your own Seminary building. Next, you would not fail to pay some attention to the crowds of human beings who would gather around you or pass rapidly by you. If the weather were hot they would be bareheaded, with long plaited queues of jet black coarse hair, tipped off with black silk braid, dangling down to their heels, or coiled round the top of the head, and as to the body, naked, except so far as their nakedness is covered by loose pants which leave

uncovered all above the waist, and all below the thighs. This is for the rabble. Gentlemen will be clad in long robes of white grass cloth with an under garment and pants, or rather leggins. In colder weather however they would be covered with furs, (some of which have been brought from America across Behrings straits), and would have their shaven heads protected by a small scull cap of silk, or a large shapeless felt hat. In passing through the streets you will be surprised to see that the shops & stores are so much exposed, and that they are so small. The whole of the front side of the shops is almost always entirely open, exposing to view from the street the whole interior. At night they are closed by large upright bars set closely together. In the business streets the sign boards suspended vertically at the doors and covered with large characters - red, black, & gilt, - form one of the principal ornaments. The noises that strike you here are only the chattering of human voices & the tramp of human feet. There is no incessant din of drays, omnibuses, carts, carriages, nor even of wheelbarrows. The shoulders of men must, in one way or other, bear the weight of all burdens. Coolies with heavy burdens are constantly passing you and meeting you, always on a dog trot and sending forth loud inarticulate sounds from their throats to warn passengers to turn aside. Here & there an auctioneer sings his song over a pile of old or new clothes, surrounded sometimes by a dozen women & sometimes by as many men, the latter always with that indispensable appendage to a Chinaman - a pipe, measuring some feet in length. Occasionally a mandarin in an elegant sedan, with runners before & a train of followers in the rear, will hurry swiftly past. In the more retired streets you see tradesmen plying industriously their various crafts. The houses are mostly of one story - never more than two - & within seldom give much evidence of comfort, almost never of

neatness, and frequently of wretchedness and poverty. This may give you some faint idea of the outward appearance of our field of labour, but this is only the outside, what can be seen & handled. Our aim is to reach what lies within. The field in which our seed is to be sown lies beyond the sight, yet it is to be reached by the medium of things which are seen. It is more important that I should tell you what is the nature of the soil than what are the features of its surface — what are the thoughts & feelings that have taken possession of the hearts of these men rather than what clothes they wear. This however is most difficult to learn, & when learned, most difficult to communicate to another. The three great influences which seem to sway most powerfully the Chinese mind are those of money, custom, & superstition. The glimpse we have taken at the streets of the city has shown something of the eagerness with which the people follow after gain. Mammon can boast as devoted worshippers here as in our own money-making lands. Here too, as elsewhere, the men devoted to gain make this their religion & care little for any other except so far as it serves their own purposes. The power of custom is felt by all classes and conditions of society, so far as to be a tyranny. Her laws run out through all the ramifications of society & seem to be like the laws of the Medes & Persians. Whatever is contrary to custom is regarded almost as a crime, and that it is custom is a sufficient reason for any thing however absurd, and a sufficient answer to any objection, however reasonable. In this probably there will be found one of the greatest obstacles to our work. I think it is almost entirely on this that the great national idolatry of the worship of ancestors rests. I am not able to judge, as yet, from so limited an intercourse with the people, to what extent it is based upon the affections, but from what I have seen I think the whole is a heartless form from which multitudes would be very willing to be excused. The ceremonies at the graves are

generally performed with unmoved feelings, & often with much levity. I have seen them spread a table before the tomb with a light cheerful air, as if spreading a feast for themselves, as in fact they are, then stand at a respectful distance, clasp the hands, raise them toward the face & repeatedly bow the head low towards the earth, as if with the utmost reverence; then turn & laugh and chat with the by standers, burn the paper clothes and money for the spirits, & carry off the substantials for their own use. Yet we may not hope that Christianity will root out these ridiculous rites without a terrible struggle, partly because they are universal & have been universal for ages, & partly because they appeal to the feelings of natural affection. = As to the superstitions which veil the Chinese mind in darkness, they are innumerable. Some of them are idolatrous; others are merely the offspring of ignorance. Their minds seem to be full of all kinds of ridiculous superstitious notions. There is but little reverence paid to the Gods at the temples. The women seem to be particularly devoted to them, but even they seldom pay them much honour except on set days, when they flock to the temples or in case of affliction. They may be seen before the idols counting their beads, & calling over, in a sing song tone, the name of Omeh-fuh (or Buddh) or bowing before the image of Kwan Yin in hope of obtaining, what in their view is the chief good, the gift of children. Other foolish notions have a strong hold upon the whole natural mind; as for instance the lucky & unlucky days, seasons & places. They have diviners whose business it is to determine all such questions. If a house is to be built they determine when it may be commenced, where the door must be placed &c. In case of death they say when it will answer to perform the funeral ceremonies, & in what particular spot the body may be despoited. The corpse of a rich merchant in Canton was kept twenty years because the diviners could not find a lucky spot for the tomb. They in the mean time were entirely supported by the family of the deceased. The Chinese can scarcely be said to be believers in a future existence, although they have some vague notions of the existence of the soul after death. They have very faint notions, if any, of a future state of rewards & punishments, but the belief in the doctrine of the metempsychosis seems to be common.

This may help you to form some conception of the obstacles which meet us in our work & of the necessity of much prayer in our behalf by the churches. It may also show you how much we need more labourers. = Praying always for the increase of your faith, and joy

I am, dear brethren,

Yours affectionately in the gospel

M. S. Culbertson

To the Soc. of Inquiry Theo. Seminary

Princeton.